The Howl and Its Echo:
Deborah Paredez's *Year of the Dog*

Deborah Paredez. *Year of the Dog*. BOA Editions, Ltd., 2020. $17.00, 128 pgs.
Reviewed by Laura Joyce-Hubbard

Deborah Paredez's *Year of the Dog* (BOA, 2020) is a poetry collection, but it could also be called a gallery exhibit—one filled with language, photographs, collages, historical accounts, and mythological figures. To open *Year of the Dog* is to enter through a turnstile; the reader experiences the Vietnam War through the lens of both the Paredez family's private experience and the public mythologies that surround the war. Paredez fills the silent spaces left long after her father's deployment to Vietnam like a curator filling a museum. She asks the reader to consider the violence of the war and its vast aftermath, with her poetics as our docent.

Year of the Dog starts in the eponymous year of 1970, the year of the poet's birth, when her father deploys to Vietnam as a military dentist. Perhaps in homage to her father's profession, Paredez also employs the art of extraction—collaging her father's personal photographs and caption excerpts; found text; archival documentation; English language idioms; and iconic photographs of the era. For example, the phrase, "here is another shot / so you can imagine," written in her father's handwriting, is sandwiched between two complementary pieces: "Lightening," a poem detailing the shooting death of Black Panther leader, Fred Hampton; and "A Show of Hands," Paredez's poem examining the ways in which the word "hand" has been adapted, often in violent expressions, in common English phrases: "hand- / to-hand combat idle / hands are the Devil's play / into the enemy's hand / […] blood / on his hands" (16). In one

sense, Paredez is representing her father's experience in Vietnam as he endured it. But in another, Paredez employs his memorabilia to make a broader point: like memory, art is always sieved through the perspective of the artist.

The collaging of these various components achieves an effect greater than the sum of its parts: not only do readers recognize the ways violence has seeped into everyday English, but they do *imagine*—far beyond the vivid scene of Hampton's murder and the landscape of war in Vietnam. The book's dimensionality, kaleidoscopic in its variety, serves as an aperture—compelling readers to envision how the Vietnam War spread across the globe like a shock wave, from Da Nang and Phu Bai (116) to Chicago to "O—H— I— / O—I—OH—OH—OH" (20).

The author's father's handwriting continues throughout the collection, such as on page 36, where he scrawls, "cross them to reach Da Nang" (36). Paredez places this phrase between image fragments of her father's arm, laid across his abdomen. These images—oriented at different angles that form a grid of arms—are enmeshed between another poem about idioms ("Hearts and Minds") and an historical account ("Edgewood Elegy"). This collage, which shows the same image fragment turned in multiple directions, serves as a key to the poems that precede and follow it: in both the collage and the poems, readers are asked to examine things from multiple perspectives. This is a pattern Paredez uses throughout the book—repeating, turning, inverting—to convey the multiple dimensions inherent in any narrative of violence.

"Hearts and Minds," extracts its title from a refrain used throughout history related to the taking up of arms—in this case, Lyndon Johnson's definition, in 1964, of what a victory in Vietnam would look like: winning the "hearts and minds" of the Vietnamese people. By omitting certain sections of text with empty brackets, Paredez deftly compels the reader to hear words

that are not there, similar to the way one might hear an echo. The reader automatically fills in the poem's blank spaces with the word "heart" or "mind:" "bleeding [ ] / [...] strike / fear in the [ ]" (37). Paredez also uses artful omission in the photo work throughout the book; most of the images she includes are partial, cropped. The fragments of text and image remind readers of war's relentless violence that can erase whole individuals. The reader understands the carnage of war as ceaseless, and like an echo, these effects linger long after war is over. Further, Paredez uses partiality to emphasize the limitations of her project—the certain distance inherent in the triangulation between her, her father, and the war. She is distanced from the war due to her age, her role as daughter versus participant, and her father's silence upon his homecoming. In recounting her father's suffering after returning from Vietnam, Paredez closes the poem "Lavinia Writing in the San, 1973," with the line: "and the whole house gone silent" (84).

Likewise, her father's role as a dentist likely distanced him from many of the combative, front-line elements of the war. Paredez's technique reminds readers that photographs, and poems, too, for that matter, comprise only a fragment of complete narratives. In the pages between her poems, Paredez presents textual collages, juxtaposing words and phrases with empty brackets (e.g., "your [ ] not"). These visual moments remind us of the fragmented nature of recollection (e.g., 85, 87, 97).

Paredez invokes a deepened understanding of history that joins the individual to the larger body politic of war. For instance, the poem "Edgewood Elegy" addresses Latinx participation in the Vietnam War, a seldom-told aspect of history. In documenting the fifty-four casualties of the "predominantly lower-income Mexican immigrant and Mexican-American west side neighborhood of San Antonio," Paredez provokes the reader to linger in this specific, often unaccounted-for loss (30). Because Latinx veterans were classified as "white" during the Vietnam

era, the toll of the war on these communities is a bracket of unknown numbers. After his deployment, her father remained silent about his experience in Vietnam, all while his body shook with seizures. Paredez is charged with the task of "*[m]ak[ing] sure /[her] father doesn't swallow / his tongue"* (84). "Edgewood Elegy" prompts the reader to ask, whose stories are left untold in the echo of inadequate recognition?

Paredez employs both given poetic forms (like the opening villanelle, "Wife's Disaster Manual" and the closing sonnet "Self-Portrait in the Time of Disaster") alongside her own concrete forms and free-verse selections. Like a toggle between photographic lenses, this tension parallels that between received histories that documentarians have selected for us from the Vietnam War era (e.g., Kent State, Jackson State College, Kim Phúc) and lesser-documented histories like the casualties cited above in "Edgewood Elegy." This tension between given/non-given poetic forms slows down the reading experience and allows readers to pause. Whereas her free verse poems represent an unrestrained howl of grief, the given forms are more controlled. In the opening poem, "Wife's Disaster Manual," the repeating refrain of the villanelle creates a quieter set of instructions in the face of devastating loss: "When the forsaken city starts to burn, / after the men and children have fled, / stand still, silent as prey, and slowly turn / …" (13). The effect of the villanelle's repetition enacts a type of immediate-remembering for the reader over this single poem—ultimately something Paredez's collection asks readers to do, within a remembrance of this history.

Throughout *Year of the Dog*, Paredez asks the readers to engage in what Ross Gay calls "the act of deep looking," focusing her readers' eyes on details. For example, the second section of the collection opens with the famous photo of Phan Thi Kim Phúc (57), often referred to as "Napalm Girl." But in this gallery space, consisting of twenty-two pages (the entirety of the

collection's second section), Paredez points toward specific injuries and lies; we only see Phúc's arms. The reader must look deeply and unabashedly at the unfathomable violence Phúc endured in the poem, "Kim Phúc in the Barsky Burn Unit," where readers hear the woman's "shattered cries […] high whine […] low moan […] the wails of flayed prey" (71). The detailed agony provokes a reader to "[leave] language behind" as Phúc did, especially when this horror follows General Westmoreland's lie, claiming that Phúc's injuries were not sustained by napalm but by "hibachi" (67). Like the brackets found in her poems of omission, readers can't help but hear the echo of violence in what's not contained in *Year of the Dog.* It evokes the blasphemy surrounding other US-involved wars like the "Weapons of Mass Destruction" used to justify the invasion of Iraq and the onset of the second Gulf War. Paredez, in her specificity, evokes the echo of US violence and erasures.

Paredez also invokes other tragedies adjacent to the Vietnam War that unfolded far from the battlefield. The effect is to see war in its raw, uncontained outpouring of harm—not relegated to one battlefield or country, but as an expanse—"a chasm, hole, rupture" (20) in the fabric of human experience. Through the ekphrastic poem, "Year of the Dog: Synonyms for Aperture" (20), Paredez offers historical details about the Kent State shooting, reflecting on the era-defining photograph of Mary Ann Vecchio kneeling over a slain friend, Jeffrey Miller: "Mary Ann's mouth / is open, an obliterated star. Synonyms for aperture: mouth— / gap—cleft—chasm—hole—rupture—perforated passage—eye" (20).

But this wide view of history is unreliable. In the same poem, Paredez urges readers to consider what is beyond the frame of the iconic Kent State photograph: "Snowy blossoms shroud the dogwoods out- / side the frame" (20). In doing so, she reminds readers of the immeasurable, often invisible expanse in the ripple of war. There's always a person, a population,

or a country outside the framing of what is known or told about violence.

The page that follows displays the famed photo, duplicated thrice but segmented: we see only Vecchio's arms and open mouth of shock. These photo fragments are overlaid with text from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: "As her / open mouth / shaped / itself / for words, / trying to / speak, she / barked" (22). Paredez invokes Hecuba, to create an anthem—one to both feminist grief and again to the innocent civilians lost or maimed by war. This depiction of women's grief runs throughout the collection, from "Wife's Disaster Manual," to "Self Portrait with Weeping Woman," to Kim Phúc wailing in the Barsky Burn Unit, to "Self Portrait with Howling Woman," to "Hecuba on the Shores of Al-Faw, 2003." In this sense, every year, for women, is "the year of the dog."

The year Paredez finishes her collection is another "year of the dog" —2018, the year when the greatest number of U.S. school shootings was recorded to date. Although the collection focuses mainly on a war from another generation entirely, the collection's ripple continues in the ongoing conversation around gun violence. As such, the reader is again left standing in war's howl— appreciating that those who remember suffer; those who are not remembered suffer; and those who love the ones suffering also suffer. The reader understands there is no escaping the reach of violence. Like the poet's daughter in the collection's final poem, bundled in a winter coat and trapped in too-hot mittens, Paredez's readers have no choice but to "[strain] against […] this leashing," to "[howl] into [their] hands" and demand: out (107).

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